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06

IN PRAISE OF THE PROPHET: ILLUMINATED *KITAB MAWLID* MANUSCRIPTS FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

ANNABEL TEH GALLOP

The most beautiful illuminated Islamic manuscripts in Southeast Asia are, not surprisingly, copies of the Qur’an. As the physical manifestation of the Divine Revelation, the creation of a copy of the Qur’an was approached with care and reverence, using the best materials available, which in wealthy circles could include high-quality European paper, rich pigments and the ultimate deluxe embellishment: gold (fig. 1).

The next most finely decorated genre of Islamic manuscripts in the Malay world is devotional literature and prayer books in praise of the Prophet Muhammad, reflecting the profound love and pious adoration felt through the ages for the ‘noblest of mankind’. Illuminated copies of the *Dala’il al-Khayrat*, the collection of prayers and blessings on the Prophet composed by the Moroccan Sufi al-Jazuli (d. circa 1465), constitute some of the most exquisite works of book art ever seen in the region, and have attracted considerable scholarly attention.[1] Less well known are *kitab mawlid*, a broad term for biographical narratives about the Prophet, recounting events around his birth and early life. Manuscripts of these texts, too, are often decorated with beauty and artistry.[2]

Such hagiographies of the Prophet, in verse or prose, are often recited in Muslim communities on specific occasions, notably on the Prophet’s birthday on 12 Rabiulawal, and also to accompany celebrations such as marriages and circumcisions. There has been much scholarship on and interest in the history of these traditions, which did not evolve until some centuries after the lifetime of the Prophet. Official state-sanctioned celebrations on the Prophet’s birthday most likely arose during the time of the Fatimid Dynasty in Egypt in the eleventh century,[3] although private devotional observation of the *mawlid* may have evolved earlier from Imami pietic traditions,[4] while the distinct genre of *mawlid* texts narrating the Prophet’s birth only begins to emerge in the twelfth century.[5] As an acknowledged innovation, both the commemoration itself of the Prophet’s birth, and certain associated rituals, have not been without contestation. For example, the issue of whether or not to stand, as a mark of honour, when the Prophet’s name was mentioned in the reading of the text (*berdiri mawlid*) was a subject of fierce debate in Southeast Asia around the

1 See Jan Just Witkam, *The Battle of the Images: Mekka vs. Medina in the Iconography of the Manuscripts of al-Jazuli’s Dalâ’il al-Khayrât* (Leiden: preprint, Legatum Warnerianum, 2001); Farouk Yahya, “A *Dala’il al-Khayrat* Manuscript in the Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia (MSS 1273)” (M.A. thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2006); Farouk Yahya, “Illustrated and Illuminated Manuscripts of the *Dala’il al-Khayrat* from Southeast Asia,”*Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 12, no. 3–4 (2021): 529–81. The *Dala’il al-Khayrat* was the focus of an exhibition at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia in 2016 (Nurul Iman Rusli, *Dala’il al-Khayrat: Prayer Manuscripts from the 16th to 19th Centuries* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, 2016), and of a special issue of the *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 12 no. 3–4 (2021).

2 Salawati Abdul Wahab, Ab Razak Ab Karim, and Norazlin Hamidon,“Reka Letak dalam Ragam Hias Kitab Maulid di Alam Melayu,” *Idealogy* 3, no. 3 (2018): 171–88.

3 Nico Kaptein, *Muhammad’s Birthday Festival: Early History in the Central Muslim Lands and Development in the Muslim West until the 10th/16th century* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

4 Marion Holmes Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 5.

5 Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 50.

Fig.1: Richly illuminated Qur’an manuscript from Java, nineteenth century. IAMM 2010.7.1

turn of the twentieth century.[6] Nonetheless, *mawlid* celebrations — both in public and private — have continued to be popular into the present day, and women often play a prominent role in the sung recitation of the texts.[7]

There are many different *mawlid* texts in circulation, and some are known to have been present in the Malay world since at least the start of the seventeenth century. A manuscript copied in Aceh around 1604 includes the thirteenth-century *Qasidah al-Burda*, ‘Ode of the Mantle’ by Imam al-Busiri of Egypt, with an interlinear Malay translation.[8] Perhaps the most oft-cited work is by the Shafi‘i mufti of Medina, Ja‘far al-Barzanji (1690–1764), composed in both prose (*nathr*) and poetic (*nazm*) versions. But judging from the manuscript evidence, by far the most popular *mawlid* text in Southeast Asia is the anonymous *Sharaf al-Anam*, ‘The Honour of Mankind’. The origins of this work are shrouded in mist, but the most recent scholarship suggests it was probably composed in Andalusia by the thirteenth century. Authorship has been attributed to Abu al-Abbas Ahmad ibn Qasim al-Maliki al-Bukhari al-Andalusi al-Lakhmi, known as al-Hariri, even though this individual can not be identified in the biographical dictionaries.[9] In the catalogue of Arabic manuscripts in the Netherlands, all 22 copies and partial copies listed of *Sharaf al-Anam* are said to be from

6 Nico Kaptein,“The *Berdiri Mawlid* Issue Among Indonesian Muslims in the Period from circa 1875 to 1930,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 149, no. 1(1993): 124–53.

7 Sakinah Abu Bakar, *Maulud Jawi Sebagai Tradisi Kesenian Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2016).

8 Cambridge University Library LI.6.25, see Ricklefs and Voorhoeve 1977: 112, cited in Farouk Yahya, “Illustrated and Illuminated Manuscripts of the *Dala’il al-Khayrat* from Southeast Asia,”*Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 12, no. 3–4 (2021): 532.

9 Katz, who notes that the *Sharaf al-Anam* shares similarities of portions of text and even attribution of authorship with another Andalusian work of the thirteenth century, the *Mawlid al-‘Arus*, ‘Birth of the bride/groom’, widely attributed to al-Jawzi. See Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 51–53. Trimingham attributed *Sharaf al-Anam* to a considerably later author with a Yemeni nisba, ‘Abd al-Rahman Ibn al-Daiba’ al-Zabidi (1461–1537) see J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 207.

Indonesia.[10] After the Qur'an, *Mawlid Sharaf al-Anam* was the second earliest Islamic work to be printed in Southeast Asia at a local press outside government control, in Surabaya in 1853,[11] while several editions were printed in Singapore in 1871.[12] In a popular compendium of *mawlid* texts lithographed in India in multiple editions from the 1870s onwards and distributed all over Southeast Asia, *Sharaf al-Anam* is the first work, followed by the *Mawlid* of Barzanji in prose and verse, and the *Qasidah al-Burda.* In some cases these lithographed copies may be contemporaneous with, or even predate, the manuscripts under discussion, and thus it is important to be aware of influences feeding back into the manuscript world from the printed texts.

To date, 67 illuminated *kitab mawlid* manuscripts from Southeast Asia have been documented (as well as many more which are not decorated), nearly half of which are held in Malaysia today. They originate from all corners of the Malay world, from Sri Lanka in the west, through Aceh and the Malay Peninsula, to Java, Sulawesi and Mindanao in the east. Although not many are dated, a few are known to have been copied in the eighteenth century, while most can be attributed to the nineteenth century. All are in Arabic and appear to contain versions of the *Sharaf al-Anam*, but vary considerably in length. It should be borne in mind that early *mawlid* texts such as *Sharaf al-Anam* 'straddle the boundary between authored compositions and the anonymous products of a shared tradition',[13] and the same passages of rhymed prose may occur in different works. A notable feature of this genre is the relatively common occurrence of interlinear translations into vernacular languages. Fourteen of the manuscripts have interlinear translations into Malay while one from Java has a translation into Javanese in *Pegon* script, all written in a tiny neat hand beneath the main lines of Arabic. By comparison, relatively few Qur'an manuscripts with interlinear translations into vernacular Southeast Asian languages are known.

The art of the Qur'an is innately conservative, both drawing on and feeding back into a clear local consensus of the appropriate graphic form for the holy book. The resulting distinctive regional artistic styles associated with Qur'an manuscripts can sometimes also be glimpsed in the decoration of *kitab mawlid*, and have assisted in the identification of manuscripts from Aceh and the East Coast schools of Patani and Terengganu. Yet as non-canonical texts, *kitab mawlid* were approached by manuscript artists in a freer and more individualistic spirit, which does mean that it is sometimes difficult to identify the regional origin of a decorated mawlid manuscript on stylistic grounds.

It is not only in artistic style but also in choice of format that illumination in *kitab mawlid* differs from that in copies of the Qur'an. Throughout the Malay world, illuminated Qur'an manuscripts are adorned with double decorated frames across two facing pages at the beginning of the book (fig. 1), but these full double frames are not often found in *kitab mawlid*. Instead, the most common illuminated format is the double headpiece, usually marking the start of a section of the text, comprising a decorated frame across two facing pages with the ornamentation concentrated in a panel above the text on each page. Single headpieces on one page are also common, as are triangular tailpieces at the end of a section of text. The presence of poetry in *kitab mawlid* manuscripts adds another artistic dimension to their graphic form, with vertical columns separating lines, and ornamental rosettes made up of multiple intersecting circles ending lines of verse. The repeated opening words *al-salam 'alayka*, 'blessings be upon him' at the start of the opening poem in the *Sharaf al-Anam* offer manifold opportunities for calligraphic 'beautification', for example through nestling the word '*alayka* above *al-salam*, or with the alternating use of coloured inks. Very occasionally depictions of Mecca and Medina primarily associated with *Dala'il al-Khayrat* manuscripts are also encountered in *kitab mawlid*, reflecting the shared spirit of veneration of the Prophet.

10 Peter Voorhoeve, *Handlist of Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of the University of Leiden and Other Collections in the Netherlands* (The Hague: Leiden University Press., 1980), 207–08.

11 Nico Kaptein, "An Arab Printer in Surabaya in 1853," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 149, no. 2 (1993): 356–62.

12 Ian Proudfoot, *Early Malay Printed Books: A Provisional Account of Materials Published in the Singapore-Malaysia Area up to 1920, Noting Holdings in Major Public Collections* (Kuala Lumpur: Academy of Malay Studies and The Library, University of Malaya, 1993), 340.

13 Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 53.

Figs 2 and 3: Initial double headpieces marking the opening of the poem in two Patani-style manuscripts of *Mawlid Sharaf al-Anam.* IAMM 1998.1.745 and IAMM 1998.1.906

Figs 4 and 5: Double headpieces at the start of the narrative section. IAMM 1998.1.745 and IAMM 1998.1.906

Figs 6 and 7: Double headpieces and decorated columns at the start of the poem, *Asharaqa al-badr 'alayna*, 'A full moon rises over us'. IAMM 1998.1.745 and IAMM 1998.1.906

The Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia holds six illuminated *kitab mawlid* manuscripts: two in the Patani style (IAMM 1998.1.745 and IAMM 1998.1.906) and another probably also from the East Coast (IAMM 1998.1.13); one created in the Ottoman style (IAMM 2014.5.14) and another from Mindanao (IAMM 2013.7.114); and finally a much more recent example, possibly dating from the early twentieth century (IAMM 1998.1.1613, fig. 20). The variety of formats is illustrated well by the two small manuscripts from Patani: IAMM 1998.1.745 is a simple volume, coloured in a palette of red, ochre and green, while IAMM 1998.1.906, which has an interlinear translation into Malay, is damaged but was created in a grander artistic idiom, and is illuminated in red, green and gold. In each manuscript, the same sections of the text are introduced by double headpieces, with the first pair framing the start of the *salawat* or poetic salutations starting *al-Salam 'alayka* followed on each line by a different epithet of the Prophet (figs 2 and 3). The second double headpiece marks the start of the narrative section with the opening words from which the text gets its name, *Alhamdulillah al-dhi sharaf al-anam bi-sahib al-maqam al-a'la*, 'Praise be to God who honoured mankind with the possessor of the highest station' (figs 4 and 5). The third pair marks the start of the well-known beautiful song, *Asharaqa al-badr 'alayna*, 'A full moon rises over us' (figs 6 and 7). IAMM 1998.1.906 also has a fourth double headpiece, enclosing a prayer (fig. 8). Both manuscripts contain ornamental triangular tailpieces, which are unusually left uncoloured (figs 9 and 10). Decorated columns divide lines of verse, with other poetic lines separated by flower-like composite roundels, the base unit being the small circles used in Qur'an manuscripts as verse markers.

Fig. 8: Double headpieces at the start of a prayer. IAMM 1998.1.906

Sometimes, a study of the artistic elements in *kitab mawlid* manuscripts can establish links between manuscripts now located in greatly distant places. Thus the artist, probably from the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula, who created one of the *Mawlid Sharaf al-Anam* manuscripts now in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (figs 11 and 12) must also have been responsible for another *mawlid* manuscript now in the Ali Hasjmy Foundation in Aceh (fig. 13).[14] In the Malay artistic idiom, all ornamentation is normally drawn with a fine black-ink pen, and the resulting pattern then coloured in within the black outlines. It is relatively unusual in Southeast Asia to find ornamental lines in colour, such as the thin blue and red rays emanating from the double headpieces of these two sibling manuscripts. These in fact hint at Ottoman influence, where such coloured rays, called *tig*, form an important element of the artistic repertoire.

It is not surprising to encounter signs of Ottoman artistic influence in the Malay world due to long links mediated particularly through the annual Hajj pilgrimage, which since the sixteenth century had been conducted under Ottoman jurisdiction. These interconnections are reflected in an exceptional *Mawlid Sharaf al-Anam* manuscript in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, IAMM 2014.5.14, superbly painted in a palette of gold, red, blue, yellow and maroon, with three double headpieces and a number of delicate floral panels (figs 14–16). In terms of calligraphy and illumination this manuscript is indistinguishable from other fine Ottoman copies of the nineteenth century, but

Figs 9 and 10: Monochrome tailpieces at the end of a section. IAMM 1998.1.745 (above) and IAMM 1998.1.906 (below)

14 Unfortunately, in both manuscripts the green pigment used has degraded and damaged the paper. My photograph of the manuscript in Aceh was taken in 1993, when it was still in reasonable condition; today the manuscript is damaged almost beyond recognition.

Figs 11 and 12: Double headpiece, decorated columns, and tailpiece in a *Sharaf al-Anam* manuscript, probably from the East Coast. IAMM 1998.1.13

Fig. 13: Manuscript of *Mawlid Sharaf al-Anam* held in Yayasan Ali Hajsmy, Banda Aceh. Photograph by A.T. Gallop, 1993

Fig. 14: Double headpiece in an Ottoman-style *Sharaf al-Anam* manuscript copied by Ibrahim al-Khulusi from Sumbawa. IAMM 2014.5.14

Fig. 15: Double headpiece and floral panels in Ibrahim al-Khulusi's *mawlid* manuscript. IAMM 2014.5.14

Fig. 16: Double headpiece marking the start of a prayer. IAMM 2014.5.14

Fig. 17: Colophon of the *Mawlid Sharaf al-Anam* naming the scribe as Ibrahim al-Khulusi ibn Wudd al-Jawi al-Sambawi. IAMM 2014.5.14

the presence of an interlinear Malay translation in tiny letters, and the naming in the colophon of the scribe as Ibrahim al-Khulusi ibn Wudd al-Jawi al-Sambawi, his *nisba* indicating his origins on the island of Sumbawa, proves the Southeast Asian connection (fig. 17). Although the colophon gives the date of 1042 AH (1632/3 AD), written clearly in thinly inked numerals, this must be erroneous because further documentary evidence indicates that the scribe Ibrahim al-Khulusi, who was living and teaching calligraphy in Mecca, died there around 1860. On the basis of two now-effaced annotations, at some point in its history the manuscript was held in Palembang.[15]

The *mawlid* manuscript from Mindanao, IAMM 2013.7.114, is artistically one of the most unusual known, created in a bold palette of purple, yellow, green, black and reserved white, with densely ornamented full double frames (fig. 18) and large floral marginal ornaments bearing the name 'Muhammad', and exceptionally ingenious *basmalas* (fig. 19).

The collection of illuminated *mawlid* manuscripts in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, while small, nonetheless displays an extraordinary range of artistic styles and tastes. Despite the great prestige of the Ottoman Empire, the many centuries of close contacts, and the existence of trained practitioners in the book arts from the Malay world, it is in fact extremely unusual to find manuscripts in Southeast Asia which adhere quite so clearly to Ottoman artistic practice as the *mawlid* manuscript IAMM 2014.5.14 (figs 14–17) shown here. Rather, a profound and enduring attachment to vernacular aesthetics has yielded manifold creations in a quintessentially Malay aesthetic, which still manages to reflect the wide range of local idioms throughout the Southeast Asian archipelago.

15 Written crudely twice in the manuscript, once across an empty half-page and once below the colophon, and now effaced, is the following name and address: *Sayid Ahmad bin Salim ibn Shaikh Abu Bakar 13 Ulu Palembang.*

Fig. 18: *Mawlid Sharaf al-Anam*, from Mindanao. IAMM 2013.7.114

Fig. 19: *Mawlid Sharaf al-Anam*, from Mindanao, with a marginal ornament inscribed 'Muhammad' and 'salla Allah, salla Allah, 'alayya, and 'alayhi wassalam'. IAMM 2013.7.114

Fig. 20: *Mawlid Sharaf al-Anam* from the East Coast of Malay Peninsula. IAMM 1998.1.1613